Hands *on the* Land

Interagency Strategy

2005 – 2009





Hands *on the* Land



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Preface

Hands on the Land is a project of Partners in Resource Education (PRE), an alliance of five Federal agencies that manage public lands or work with America's private land owners. The agencies are the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, the USDA Forest Service, and the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Collectively, the agencies are responsible for the stewardship of Federally owned public lands comprising approximately one-third of the acreage of the United States. Coordination is provided by the National Environmental Education & Training Foundation, a non-profit foundation chartered by the Congress in 1990. In addition to Hands on the Land, PRE supports a variety of educational programs and initiatives related to high-priority resource issues, such as fire management, weed suppression, and endangered species management.



Introduction

America's national forests, national parks, national wildlife refuges, and other public and private lands offer unique teaching and learning opportunities. They comprise nearly one-third of the land area of the United States. Hands on the Land, a national network of field classrooms, connects students, teachers, and parents to these lands all across America.

Hands on the Land links programs for students in grades K-12 offered on public lands or other lands where one of the PRE Federal agencies is involved. Partnerships among Federal personnel at HOL sites, local schools, and community organizations ensure a solid educational and local support base. These local programs involve students in hands-on activities which are designed to support the teaching of required curriculum and to help students meet applicable education standards. At the same time Federal land management agencies with common resource conservation goals are afforded a unique opportunity to work together in achieving them. Students are engaged in a wide variety of activities such as monitoring forest revegetation, mapping the location of weed infestations, and conducting landscape surveys.

Through participation in the Hands on the Land network, local programs have an opportunity to share experiences and expertise with Federal program managers, teachers, and students involved in similar programs in other geographic areas. An interactive website, http://www.handsontheland.org, provides the avenue for students to exchange and compare project results, for teachers to structure exchange programs with other schools and to share teaching materials, and for Federal program providers (Federal employees responsible for managing educational programs) to exchange expertise with staff throughout the country. An annual meeting of member sites provides another key forum for the sharing of experiences and expertise. These collaborative efforts help the member sites stretch their limited resources, enhance the quality of the educational experiences they offer, and unify the resource education efforts of Federal agencies.

Hands on the Land began as a pilot project in 1999. Financial support from the PRE agencies and from the Environmental Protection Agency has enabled the program to establish itself as a viable model with more than 20 sites participating and a dynamic website. In 2003, PRE signed an agreement with The Keystone Center, a non-profit public policy and educational organization, to provide coordination and administrative support for the HOL program. With HOL now at a critical stage of growth, this strategy is intended to guide the development of the program over the next five years, to establish the infrastructure needed for the program's long term sustainability, and to put "America's largest classroom" at the fingertips of every child and teacher.

Abbreviations

PRE	Partners in Resource Education	FWS	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
HOL	Hands on the Land	NRCS	Natural Resources Conservation Service
NEETF	National Environmental Education & Training Foundation	NTC	Bureau of Land Management National Training Center
BLM	Bureau of Land Management	NCTC	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service National Conservation Training Center
FS	USDA Forest Service		
NPS	National Park Service	EPA	Environmental Protection Agency

Vision

As America's largest classroom, Hands on the Land will promote educational excellence by providing students across America with hands-on learning in natural and cultural settings.



Goals

- Enhance curriculum-based student learning in natural, historical, and archaeological settings.
- Expand student understanding of basic environmental processes, and help students develop skills for investigating, evaluating, and making decisions about the environment.
- Expand collaborative efforts among Federal agencies, schools, and communities to make the best use of staff, funding, and expertise supporting conservation education.

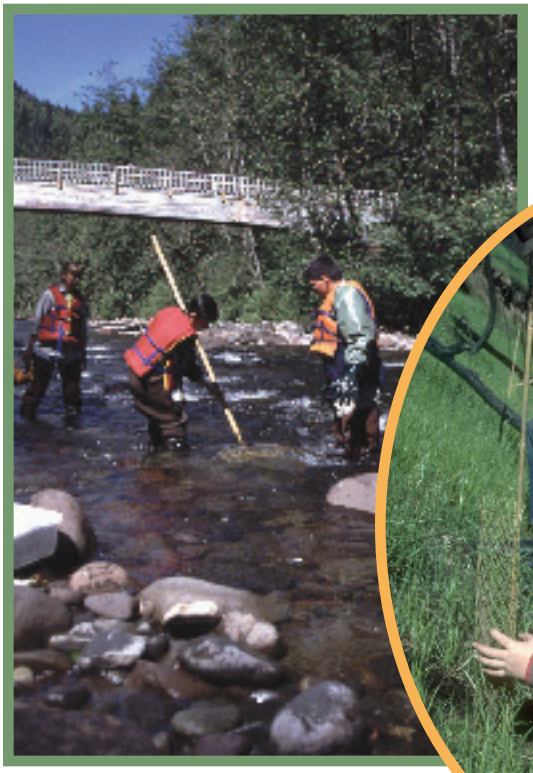
Objectives

Over the next five years, PRE seeks to –

- expand the HOL network from 22 to 172 member sites;
- establish educational excellence across the network;
- promote interactions among sites through an expanded and enhanced HOL website and other avenues;
- develop partner and agency support at both the local and national levels;
- establish the network as a widely recognized resource for educators as well as a resource for Federal agency leaders to support conservation education priorities;
- provide continuous program improvement through effective administration and evaluation.

The following strategies are designed to meet these objectives. (Some strategies will be undertaken over the course of several years. Dates indicate the starting point for each strategy.)

Program Framework and Administration





Establish a framework that supports program goals and program growth.

All field classrooms participating in the HOL network should have sustainable programs that enhance kindergarten through high school learning by utilizing America's public lands and selected private lands as laboratories of learning. In order to ensure that standards of excellence are met and to promote program growth, a framework for the program and clear administrative direction must be established.

Strategies:

A.1 Establish HOL national coordinator (PRE/2005)

A.2 On an annual basis, develop a work plan for the national coordinator (PRE/EPA/2005)

A.3 Create clearly defined criteria for participation in HOL, particularly the correlation of programs and materials to education standards (PRE/Keystone/2005)

A.4 Ensure that existing sites meet criteria and, if they do not, develop procedure to bring them into compliance (PRE/Keystone/by 2006)

A.5 Develop an application process and standard site participation agreement that will ensure sites meet the criteria for participation (PRE/Keystone/2005)

A.6 Make available models of agreements between Federal partners and schools (PRE/Keystone/2005)

A.7 Identify minimum site reporting requirements and develop data collection procedures (PRE/Keystone/2005)

Program Tools

Program Tools

Make available to HOL program providers a broad range of program tools to support HOL field classroom programs.

Many outstanding programs and materials have already been developed by Federal agencies in partnership with local schools. Sharing these resources and the expertise involved in developing them will reduce redundant efforts, encourage best practices, and ensure that all participants have the tools they need to do an effective job. Where programs, materials, and equipment do not exist, PRE must work with community partners to address site needs.







Strategies:

B.1 Make standard job descriptions available to HOL sites (PRE/Keystone/2006)

B.2 Provide guidelines and expertise to HOL sites in the development of teaching materials that adhere to excellence guidelines and are correlated to standards (PRE/Keystone/ University contractor/2006)

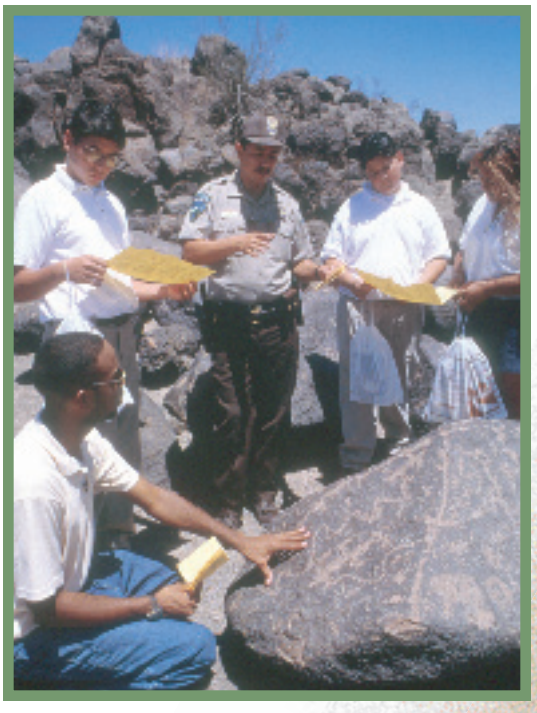
B.3 Post teaching materials on the HOL website to make them available to the widest possible audience (Keystone/2005)

B.4 Provide guidance and recommendations to HOL sites on how to develop service learning opportunities that meet school service learning requirements and support agency resource conservation goals (NEETF/ PRE/2006)

B.5 Develop specific programs that will engage HOL sites in an interactive way (PRE/Keystone/2006)

B.6 Develop and encourage the use of a mentoring program among HOL sites (Keystone/2006)

Communication



Improve information sharing both internally and externally as well as horizontally and vertically within the network.

Communication is a key component of any network, and with HOL communication is essential at both the local and national levels. At the local level, HOL sites must promote effective communication among Federal staff, schools, parents, volunteers, and community partners. HOL sites must also communicate effectively across the network to enhance educational programs and make the most of limited resources. Effective communication among the participating agencies and partners is essential at the national level to build awareness of the program; develop community, sponsor, and agency support; showcase student learning; and recruit new sites.

Strategies:

C.1 Develop a system of routine communication and reporting among NEETF, PRE, and Keystone (PRE/NEETF/Keystone/2005)

C.2 Reprint the HOL brochure as needed (PRE/BLM/2005)

C.3 Develop new public information materials for use in marketing the program at the national level (PRE/2006)

C.4 Create a program promotion plan for internal use within agencies and for external use with potential members, partners, and sponsors (PRE/NEETF/2006)

C.5 Develop a growth plan to use with agencies and potential partners and sponsors (PRE/NEETF/2005)

C.6 Coordinate an annual meeting and conference calls as needed for HOL participants (PRE/Keystone/2005)

C.7 Identify effective communication tools for use at the community level; post these on the HOL website (PRE/Keystone/NEETF/2007)

C.8 Develop an annual HOL report (PRE/2006)



Professional Development

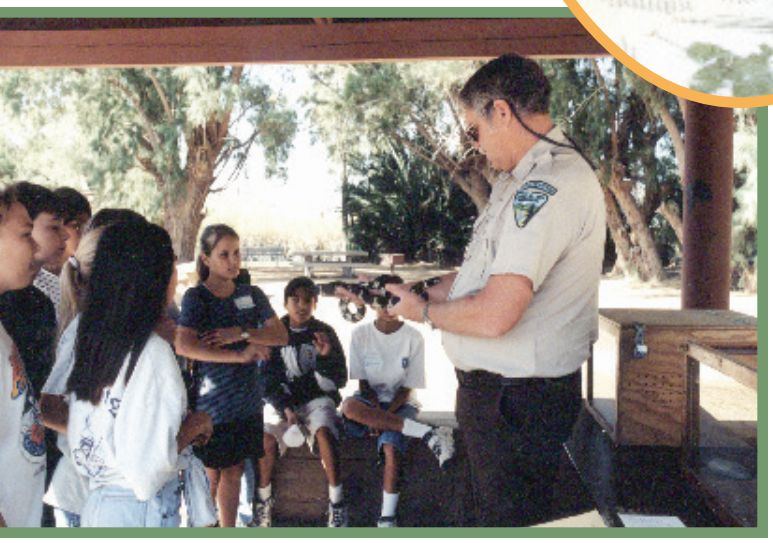
Professional Development

Assess staff, volunteer, and school educator training needs, identify training options, and establish mechanisms to facilitate training.

To ensure that HOL sites offer the highest quality instruction, continued professional development of program providers and teachers must be planned and provided.







Strategies:

D.1 Establish minimum qualifications for staff and volunteer educators and conduct an annual needs assessment to identify staff, docent, and volunteer training needs (PRE/Keystone/2006)

D.2 On an annual basis, research and provide a report to HOL sites on training options to address identified needs (Keystone/2006)

D.3 Identify HOL program providers who have expertise in developing and delivering teacher training; establish mechanisms for these individuals to share their expertise (Keystone/2005)

D.4 Develop guidance and recommendations for HOL sites on how to develop credit-based teacher training (PRE/Keystone/University contractor/2007)

D.5 Develop and distribute a "how-to" manual for newly participating program providers (PRE/Keystone/Contractor/2005)

Website Development and Maintenance





Develop a high quality, innovative website for the HOL network.

The Hands on the Land program website is an essential tool for promoting interactivity among students, teachers, and Federal agency staff across the network. Through the website, students have the opportunity to share and compare project results, teachers have the opportunity to structure exchange programs with other schools and share teaching materials, and program providers have the opportunity to share expertise with staff throughout the country. A number of steps must be taken to ensure that the website can accommodate continued program growth, supports field-based learning, has credibility with educators, meets legal requirements, and continues to be an effective communication tool for all users.

Strategies:

E.1 Establish a new server to support the HOL website (PRE/Keystone/2005)

E.2 Stabilize agency funding for web server and webmaster costs (PRE/Keystone/2005)

E.3 Research options and develop recommendations for the long-term development and maintenance of the HOL website (PRE/Keystone/Contractor/2006)

E.4 Establish an annual work plan to address development and maintenance of the HOL website. The plan should address: security, quality control, marketing, site input, data entry, postings of new materials and links, navigation, interactivity, on-line reporting systems, technical support to HOL sites (PRE/Keystone/EPA/2005)



Resource Management Linkages

Resource Management Linkages

Develop HOL programs and materials that support agency resource management objectives.



Responsible conservation of our natural, historical, and archaeological resources, both public and private, depends on an informed and educated public. Federal resource management agencies have an obligation to provide current and accurate information about resources and management options to enable the public to participate in land management decisions. Public involvement and action is absolutely essential to address certain land management challenges, such as the problem of invasive species. The Hands on the Land program provides an avenue for Federal agencies to engage youth in learning about such complex land management challenges and to encourage attitudes of respect toward the environment.



Strategies:

F.1 Post links to agency conservation education materials on the HOL website that support agency resource objectives (PRE/Keystone/2005)

F.2 Encourage HOL program providers to attend PRE resource workshops offered at the National Science Teachers Association Convention (PRE/2005)

F.3 Promote exchanges between HOL sites and such agency units as NPS resource conservation centers and FS research units (PRE agencies/2006)

F.4 Promote the involvement of HOL sites in National Public Lands Day events (PRE/NEETF/2005)

F.5 Promote HOL site participation in PRE-sponsored electronic classrooms; list opportunities on HOL website (PRE/Keystone/2005)

F.6 Develop service learning opportunities at HOL sites that support agency land management objectives (HOL program providers/2006)

F.7 Develop hands-on activities for students that enhance learning about priority resource conservation topics (HOL program providers/2006)

Funding Development





Provide sustained funding for HOL to ensure program growth and continuous improvement.

Educational programs are long-term endeavors that require time to develop and refine. Without sustained funding, quality educational programs will not evolve. Schools, volunteers, and other community partners will be reluctant to commit time and resources to HOL programs if they are ad hoc, intermittent efforts. Securing funding from both the public and private sectors will be essential to the long-term success of HOL.

Strategies:

G.1 Obtain the services of a full-time funding development specialist to obtain funding or in-kind contributions for new and existing sites for program enhancements associated with transportation, training, formal evaluation, equipment and supplies, contractor and hosted worker or volunteer positions, and travel (PRE/Keystone/2006)

G.2 Establish a steering committee with participants from both the public and private sectors to offer recommendations for HOL funding development (NEETF/Keystone/2005)

G.3 Create funding development and five-year business plans (PRE/Committee/Keystone/2005)

G.4 Coordinate HOL budget planning at the Departmental level to ensure sustained HOL agency funding (PRE/2006)



Program Evaluation

Program Evaluation

Identify proven assessment tools for evaluating the effectiveness of HOL programs. Establish minimum program evaluation requirements for HOL sites.



Educational institutions are under increased scrutiny to demonstrate that students and teachers are meeting established standards. Evaluation of HOL programs is essential to establish their effectiveness in helping schools meet these standards. Evaluation is also essential to demonstrate to Federal managers that HOL programs support priority resource management objectives. Finally, evaluation results are critical to building confidence in the program on the part of funders and community partners.



Strategies:

H.1 Research program evaluation strategies and provide recommendations to HOL sites on credible models, and encourage minimum requirements for HOL site self-assessments (PRE/ Keystone/2005)

H.2 Provide assistance to sites to remedy program deficiencies identified through program evaluations (Keystone/2006)

H.3 Establish measures of success and perform a national program evaluation (PRE/2008)



Recognition and Awards



Establish mechanisms to reward and recognize excellence among program providers, schools, students, and supporters at both the national and local levels.

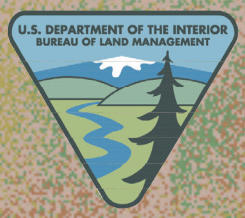
By recognizing individuals who excel in developing programs and other components of the Hands on the Land network and by acknowledging the support of partners, sponsors, managers, and volunteers, enthusiasm for the program is sustained and models of excellence are provided for others.



Strategies:

I.1 Establish a mechanism or mechanisms to provide recognition, both locally and nationally, of outstanding programs, materials, staff, managers, volunteers, partners, and sponsors. (PRE/Keystone/ NEETF/2006)











USDA NRCS
Natural Resources Conservation Service

N·E·E·T·F
The National Environmental Education & Training Foundation